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ABSTRACT

The organized experience of the Testing, Research and Data Processing Division of the University of Maryland, College Park, Counseling Center of attending a national convention and making presentations is discussed and evaluated. In evaluating the various aspects of the experience, participants agreed that "debugging" their presentation with the members of the presentation team, working on their presentation in staff meetings, and a dress rehearsal in staff meetings were all helpful to them; and that the entire organized effort was worth the time and energy, and was worth repeating. The staff rated the American College Personnel Association convention in terms of quality, overall level of program presentations (style and preparedness), overall content of the programs, and as a whole experience (i.e., a rating of three on a five-point Liker scale, ranging from poor to excellent). Some changes recommended for future conventions included: more moderate prices overall; scheduling free time throughout the day; more emphasis on counseling in program content; higher quality of program content, preparation, and delivery; and more exhibits by publishers. (Author/LB)

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AN EVALUATION OF A STAFF DEVELOPMENT EXERCISE AT THE 1980 AMERICAN COLLEGE PERSONNEL ASSOCIATION CONVENTION

Michael D. Masters and William E. Sedlacek

Research Report # 15-80

Summary

The organized experience of the Testing, Research and Data Processing Division of the University of Maryland, College Park, Counseling Center of attending a national convention and making presentations is discussed and evaluated.

In evaluating the various aspects of the experience, participants agreed that "debugging" their presentation with the members of their presentation team, working on their presentation in staff meetings, and the dress rehearsal in staff meetings were all helpful to them; and that the entire organized effort was worth the time and energy expended and was worth repeating in the future.

In terms of evaluating the ACPA convention itself, the staff rated it as only average in terms of quality, the overall level of program presentations (style and preparedness), the overall content of the programs, and the convention as a whole experience (i.e., a rating of three on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from poor to excellent). Some changes recommended for future conventions included: more moderate prices overall; scheduling free time throughout the day; more emphasis on counseling in program content; higher quality of program content, preparation and delivery; and more exhibits by publishers.

Active involvement in national or regional conferences or conventions as a presenter is a highly respected facet of our development in the counseling or student affairs professions. In addition to the knowledge and skills acquired, because of the ever increasing competitiveness of the job market in these fields, conference presentations have become, if not a virtual necessity, at least a very desirable addition to one's vita. Unfortunately for the graduate student or new professional, formalized training in how to design a program, get it accepted, and make a cogent presentation is by no means widely available. Additionally, it is important to raise the question of whether attendance at a convention can be justified in terms of direct or indirect cost to the agency or institution.

This paper describes a staff development exercise in this vein undertaken by the Testing, Research, and Data Processing Unit of the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP) Counseling Center, as well as the group's evaluation of both their experience and the 1980 ACPA convention in Boston, Massachusetts.

In the fall of 1979, taking note of the problem described above, the Center research staff decided to undertake an organized effort to learn more about presenting programs and getting more out of attending a professional convention. The Counseling Center research staff consisted of two full time staff (one doctoral and one master's level) and seven graduate research assistants with master's degrees, working on doctorates. Through a collaborative effort, three program proposals were conceived and submitted to ACPA for consideration for their 1980 national convention in Boston. Topics for these three proposals were designed so that every staff member would be responsible for presenting some aspect of their current or past research efforts. All three proposed programs involved participants from other Student affairs offices at UMCP or other institutions. Since all three proposals were accepted by ACPA, each staff member had a chance to plan and present his/her

own work at a major professional convention. In addition to the cooperative planning involved, staff meeting time was devoted to "dress rehearsals" for each of the three programs, which included detailed critical appraisal by the staff "audience."

Aside from the presentations, the many possible facets of a convention to learn from or be involved in were discussed. Here it was felt that a systematic effort to explore all aspects of a conference would increase the likelihood that the evaluations were based on broad experience and that the experience would be cost effective.

Another aspect of staff planning was logistics. Joint hotel arrangements in Boston and rail, plane, and auto travel to and from the conference were utilized by most of the nine participants. Limited supporting funds for all presenters, which covered part of the conference expenses, were made available from the Counseling Center travel budget and through another Student Affairs agency which participated in one of the presentations.

In keeping with the research mission of the unit, an evaluation form covering both the ACPA convention and the staff development experience was designed, critiqued and modified at staff meetings, and completed by the nine participants right after the conference.

Staff Development Experience

Participating in the organized group effort was seen as being both instrumental to the staff members actually making a presentation at ACPA and as a worthwhile use of staff time. Overall, staff members strongly agreed that this professional development exercise and the accompanying financial support were the major contributing factors both in their attending ACPA and in making their presentations. The staff also noted that they preferred the collaborative efforts of the experience to doing it on their own. All nine

participants felt that they participated in a greater variety of conference activities than they would have without the experience of planning and thinking about those aspects beforehand.

In evaluating the various parts of the experience, participants agreed that "debugging" their presentation with the members of their presentation team, working on their presentation in staff meetings ,and the dress rehearsal in staff meetings, were all helpful to them; and that the entire organized effort was worth the time and energy expended and was worth repeating in the future. They also felt that through this experience they had learned a great deal about the process of working up a convention presentation, writing a proposal for a convention presentation, and how to present a good program.

All staff members strongly agreed that without the organized effort they wouldn't have done as much pre-planning for the conference. When asked the most important reason they had attended the ACPA convention, nearly all staff members listed their own professional development as a program presenter. Other important reasons were to socialize with friends, and because attendance was expected as a Counseling Center Research staff member. The least important reason for attendance was to get information from exhibitors and publishers. Other factors which were considered relatively unimportant were using the placement center and making job contacts.

1980 ACPA Convention

Most Counseling Center research staff members attended all four days of the conference, stayed in a moderately priced hotel near the conference headquarters, traveled by rail, and were only moderately satisfied with the quality and cost of both their travel and lodging arrangements. Nearly all of them had attended a national convention previously; either APGA, ACPA, APA or that of some other professional association.

On the average, a staff member attended six programs at the convention, made three new and renewed four old professional contacts, and made three new and renewed three old social contacts.

In terms of evaluating the ACPA conference itself, the staff rated it as only average in terms of quality, the overall level of program presentations (style and preparedness), the overall content of the programs, and the convention as a whole experience (i.e., a rating of three on a five point Likert scale, ranging from poor to excellent). Some changes recommended for future conventions included: more moderate prices overall; scheduling free time throughout the day; more emphasis on counseling in program content; higher quality of program content, preparation, and delivery; and more exhibits by publishers.